

Sermon

Nov. 26, 2017

Christ the King Sunday

Based on Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

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It has been a hard time for celebrities, journalists, and political leaders of late. After the downfall of Harvey Weinstein when all those women came out to tell their experiences of his sexual misconduct, it seems that every day we learn of another high profile, mostly old, white man forced to confront accusations. Within 24 hours of the breaking news Charlie Rose was fired from CBS and his ties cut from PBS and Bloomberg. I wonder what his Thanksgiving was like. These accusations have brought a reckoning that has rocked our society. Some have suggested that this indicates some kind of turning point in our culture. Some have expressed hope that the uncovering of the systemic and widespread reality of sexualized exploitation will lead to needed reforms, safer work environments, and more equality for women. I hope our society will be better in the aftermath of this moment we are passing through.

It has been a deluge of allegations but this is also nothing new. Inappropriate relationships have been happening for generations. We know of Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Woody Allen has a disturbing history. All the women who came out against Bill Cosby. I am sure all of you could rattle off the names of others.

It is little comfort that church leaders have less public clout these days, otherwise we would be hearing about them in the media as well because sexual misconduct happens among pastors, as many of you know personally. I still remember back in the 1980s the fall of those televangelists Jim Bakker and of Jimmy Swaggert who famously on his program cried out "I have sinned!" Over the years, I personally know two pastors who crossed the line.

Then there is the Roman Catholic church that has been rattled with pedophilia, prompting many people to flee the church. Some don't just flee the church, calling themselves "recovering Catholics", but have

abandoned institutional religion in general. Trust has been broken and the uneven response by those in positions of leadership has not rebuilt that broken trust.

But it's not just sexual misconduct or pedophilia that has plagued the church. Greed has had a firm grip on pastors. TV preachers have been skewered for years because of their lavish lifestyles while they beg for money from their followers. Then there are the arrogant pastors who think they are better than anyone else and expect to be treated like a prince.

Of course, most pastors are not like this. We are far from perfect. But our hearts are in the right place, we understand ourselves to be servants, we don't do this to get rich. Still, there are enough pastors that have done enough damage to prompt a lot of people to distrust organized religion. This may be one reason why young people are increasingly identifying as "nones", that is, those who do not identify with any religion at all. This does not mean that they are atheists. Studies indicate there is a great deal of interest in spirituality, of being part of something bigger than oneself, of living a life of meaning and purpose. Many people still believe in God or some divine power. It is just that organized religion is not a part of that spiritual quest. And it isn't just organized religion. There is a general lack of trust in institutions, especially the government but also the media. Unless you are part of the establishment there is a lack of trust in the establishment. But even people in the establishment say they don't trust the establishment! And this has been our situation for decades, really since the 1960s.

Corruption and scandal, sexual misconduct, greed and arrogance, did not have its origins in the 1960s however. Such a reality has been present among those in positions of leadership since, well, forever. It is not new. And when I say this isn't new, I mean this was the situation when Ezekiel spoke the word of the Lord 600 years before Jesus was born. The leaders responsible for the people had only taken care of themselves. They had grown fat, hoarding the resources for themselves. Meanwhile, the people had been scattered across the land. They had been denied the resources they needed to thrive. They were lean, injured,

broken in spirit, vulnerable, lost. It was a time of great suffering and injustice because of the failure of leadership.

It is clear that God is not silent about this situation. God will not allow the failure of Israel's leaders, the rampant injustice and greed, to go on forever. God does not rush in and fix things right away. There is a long period of time given when the leaders can wake up to their failures and make things right. Prophets rise up to call the leaders to account and challenge them to change their ways, while also encouraging the people who are suffering. But eventually a day of reckoning will come. If things don't change then God will act. God will take matters into God's own hands. God will act with compassion for those who suffer under oppression and will judge those who are responsible for the oppression. As Ezekiel said, God will feed those leaders with justice.

So what does this mean for our time? We know that there is plenty of injustice in this world where those with wealth and power take care of themselves and deny others access to capital and opportunity. President Mugabe of Zimbabwe has finally resigned after having ruled that nation for I believe 39 years, destroying their economy while taking care of his family and those close to him. It is the view of many that Russia is basically an oligarchy where people fight with each other to get close to Putin so that they can have access to the wealth and natural resources of the land. In our own country, the debate over tax reform is bringing up the issue of who will be getting the most benefit and it appears yet again that when the dust settles the wealthiest will see the greatest benefit while the rest of us will only get marginal relief or potentially end up paying more if we itemize our deductions. We know we live in a time where often our leaders fail us. There is a lot of cynicism and a good deal of resentment in our body politic these days. Obama's hope and change is a fading memory. Are we living in a time where God is exercising patience? Or are we closing in on a time where God will act decisively to judge those who are oppressive and deliver those who are beaten down? Those are questions that can't be answered but there are a couple things that I want to suggest to you this morning about how we can navigate through these difficult times of injustice in which there are few leaders, if any, that we can trust.

First, let us name with gratitude that we are gathered together with our leader who cares for us. Our leader is Jesus. And Psalm 23 is true to our experience. He is the one we look to for the nourishing of our spirit. He is the one who makes us lie down in green pastures, leads us beside still waters, restores our souls, leads us in right paths. We know that Jesus is with us, no matter how dark is the valley, even when the shadow of death enshrouds us. Even when all hell is breaking loose, Jesus is by our side. Because of Jesus our shepherd we have the promise that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Second, we need to remember that there are a lot of people that are scattered, uprooted and adrift, who are malnourished, both spiritually and physically. There are those who are spiritually lost. Life is grey, flat and soulless. There are those who are physically malnourished. Food insecurity is a reality for far too many people in this land of plenty. But it's not just about lack of food. It is the lack of decent housing, of meaningful work, of access to quality health care, the grinding down of poverty that saps the life out of people. There are many people, including those who live in our community, who lack for a leader who can show them the way through life and give them the spiritual strength they need to sustain them in the journey.

Our life long task is to let people in on who our leader is. Our leader is not any pastor or bishop. I know, maybe some of you are thinking, "Pastor Kevin, I thought you were our leader." How about considering me to be your lead follower? Our leader is not an elected official. We elect judges, legislators and executive administrators, but not leaders. I'm not looking to a president to be my leader, especially the current one. Our leader is certainly not a celebrity, an entertainer or star athlete. Our leader is Jesus, a 1st century Palestinian Jew whose mother got pregnant out of wedlock and whose step-father was a carpenter. He is the one who, for us, is the way, the truth and the life. He is the one we admire. He is the one whose way of life we seek to emulate. He is the one who gave his life so that we might have eternal life. He is the one who walks with us through life, who prays for us, who shares our burdens, who is known to us in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. If we claim to be Christians, who else could be our shepherd,

our leader? He is the one that we need to point people to who are searching for meaning, who are looking for a leader. He is the one that we need to let people know about as someone who can be trusted.

But we have to go to them, not expect them to come to us. Why? Because of the lack of trust in the church. There have been too many leaders in the church who have failed in their example. There have been too many who claim the name of Christ but whose life is anything but Christian. There have been too many instances where those who identify as followers of Jesus who have justified or even actively practiced racism, sexism, homophobia, fear of the stranger. There have been way too many Christians who have given Jesus a bad name. Wendy Farley put it this way:

“The world is full to overflowing with pain. It is a relentless source of dismay for a person of faith to struggle with the omnipresence of radical, destructive suffering. But for the source of suffering to come from the church and be justified by its Scripture and traditions is a kind of toxic, crushing pain that is hard to endure ... When the church itself speaks outsized lies about us, where do we go for truth? When the church withholds divine love, where can we go to learn our true name?”

Unfortunately, what Wendy speaks of resonates with a lot of people. Perhaps for some of you in this room what she speaks of resonates with experiences that you have had. That you have given the church another chance is an act of grace. For those who share Wendy's experience there is a breakdown in trust. People do not trust the church of Jesus. There is a trust deficit that we have to overcome. This deficit has been building since the 1960s, maybe even longer. If we are going to make the case that Jesus is the one to look to for leadership, we have to do the work of building relationships in places outside of this building. We have to build those relationships at work, at school, in coffee shops, at our homes, at the bar, at restaurants, anywhere but in this building. I'm not saying don't bother to bring your friends to church. What I am saying is that for many people coming to church just is not going to happen. So those relationships have to be built elsewhere. To do this work of letting people in on who is worthy of being followed we best not point to ourselves. Whether we have been trying to live a Christian

life for a few years or for decades, we all have issues. We would be the blind leading the blind. Besides, why would we want to take on the superhuman responsibility to be the saviors of the lives of other people? There is only one savior. And we best not point to other people, setting them up on pedestals. Pointing to others and saying, “You should follow her” or “You should follow him” puts ourselves and others at risk because any person we put up as our leader will likely fail us. And with that failure comes disillusionment, cynicism, broken trust. There is only one person that *we* need to point to and that is Jesus. He is the one we know who saves us from ourselves. He is the one we know who is our help in times of need. He is the one leader we know to whom we can place our trust. For those who are searching for a leader, Jesus is the one that we can point to and say, “Here’s a person you can trust. Let me tell you how I know this to be true.”